

Understanding Moroccan “Normalization” with Israel

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Brief Analysis

The recent rapprochement between Morocco and Israel can be partly understood through Morocco’s long history of relations with its Jewish minority.

The recently announced rapprochement between Morocco and Israel goes back several years, especially in the economic and commercial field. The Moroccan decision to normalize relations with Israel is thus not a question of recognition itself but rather a resumption of earlier relations: with Moroccan recognition, trade with Israel could now also grow.

Most notably, the Kingdom has now acceded to an old Israeli request: the establishment of a direct air link for the transport of members of the Moroccan Jewish community and Israeli tourists to and from Morocco. The recognition of the Moroccan Sahara by the United States, in return for the normalization of diplomatic ties between Morocco and Israel, also promises economic benefits—though it may raise tensions with Algeria or the Polisario.

Yet it is misguided to claim that the newly opened official connection is simply a return to an old one, because that previous open connection had been ruptured for two decades, mainly due to sharp disputes over the Palestinian issue. In 1994, soon after the first Oslo Accord between the Palestinians and Israel, King Hassan II opened diplomatic relations at a subordinate level without an ambassador exchange. In making this decision, Morocco became the third Arab country—after Egypt and Jordan—to establish formal relations with the Jewish state. But the current king, Mohammed VI, broke these relations with the outbreak of the second Intifada six years later to signal support for the Palestinians.

With the resumption of relations, the Moroccan king took the initiative to call Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas and emphasize his country’s steadfast support for the Palestinian cause. Other Moroccan officials, including Prime Minister Othmani and Foreign Minister Bourita, have also echoed their support. And it is

noteworthy that, apparently in return, senior PA officials have largely stayed silent about this latest Arab normalization with Israel—in sharp contrast to their recent statements against the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan.

Historical Backdrop with Contemporary Meaning

At the same time, Morocco's openness to Israel also has deep historical, cultural, religious, and even personal roots. A special bond unites the two countries, resting partly on the Moroccan Jewish community. Though that community was not directly involved in the new normalization agreement, recent assertions from Moroccan officials that the heritage of the country's Jewish minority forms the backdrop for relations with Israel is more than mere rhetoric.

In its preamble, the Constitution of 2011 enumerates the richness and diversity of Moroccan identity, stating:

A sovereign Muslim State, attached to its national unity and to its territorial integrity, the Kingdom of Morocco intends to preserve, in its plentitude and its diversity, its one and indivisible national identity. Its unity, is forged by the convergence of its Arab-Islamist, Berber [amazighe] and Saharan-Hassanic [saharo-hassanie] components, nourished and enriched by its African, Andalusian, Hebraic and Mediterranean influences [affluents]. The preeminence accorded to the Muslim religion in the national reference is consistent with [va de pair] the attachment of the Moroccan people to the values of openness, of moderation, of tolerance and of dialogue for mutual understanding between all the cultures and the civilizations of the world.

Indeed, Morocco's Jewish minority is almost as old as the country itself. The first Jewish inhabitants probably date back to around 70 CE, after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. Until a mass migration to Israel in 1948, Jews dwelt all over Morocco, in villages, towns and cities, and lived mainly on commerce, trade, and finance. Certain traders were even appointed as financial and commercial agents to Moroccan Sultans, known as the elite *tujjar as-sultan* (Sultan's traders).

Sefrou, a City of Religious Coexistence

The city of Sefrou—30 km south of Fes—is a hallmark of this interfaith coexistence known as Little Jerusalem. There, Muslim and Jews venerated the same “saint” buried in a grotto in a neighboring mountain. The site was tactfully called “*Kaf al-moumen*” (grotto of the faithful) because it was a religious sanctuary for both Muslims and Jews, and times of worship were equally partitioned.

Similar examples of tightly interwoven communities of Muslims and Jews existed in locales such as Debdou, Azrou, Fes, Rabat, Meknes, Marrakesh, and others. Here, the large communities of Jews were full Moroccans, and as such enjoyed the full rights and obligations of their Muslim brethren.

During the Second World War, when Nazi-occupied France wanted to persecute Morocco's Jews, King Mohammed V resisted the order. He called for the persecution of all Moroccans, if this were to happen, on the grounds that they were no different from his other subjects for whose safety he was responsible.

Following in the steps of his father, King Hassan II treated Moroccan Jews with great deference. He appointed André Azoulay as a royal advisor, and was instrumental in Egypt's 1977 rapprochement with Israel under Anwar Sadat. Similarly, King Hassan II helped develop political contacts between Palestinians and Israelis leading to the Oslo Accords in 1993.

In this important respect, the present King Mohammed VI is no different from his predecessors. He is a man of dialogue and coexistence. As a result, Morocco today is a haven of peace and coexistence, with Moroccans proudly highlighting their composite identities: Amazigh, Arab, Islamic, Jewish, African, Andalusian and Mediterranean,

among others.

Pride in the Moroccan Jewish legacy

Moroccans openly regret the departure of the country's Jews during the period of 1948-1973. This was illustrated remarkably in a documentary entitled "Tinghir-Jerusalem, the echoes of the Mellah," made by Kamal Hachkar and screened worldwide. Officially, since the time of the late king Hassan II, all Moroccan Jews who left still hold Moroccan nationality and can come back to the country whenever they would like.

More recently, the Moroccan government, at the initiative of king Mohammed VI, launched a program in 2010 of the rehabilitation of Jewish cemeteries, synagogues, and other monuments. As such, 167 sites have been refurbished in fourteen regions. A book titled *Rehabilitation of Morocco's Jewish Cemeteries - The House of Life* was presented to the general public on February 2015 at the Arab World Institute (IMA) in Paris, as part of the exhibition-event "Contemporary Morocco." Serge Berdugo, the representative of the Moroccan Jewish community described what this renovation meant to his community, "This has a strong symbolic and highly religious significance and reflects the commitment of the Kingdom to the values of moderation, dialogue and respect for others. It is the expression of a reality and a culture rooted in the long history of the Kingdom."

A Moroccan Jewish cemetery

Today, Morocco is the one country in the Arab world with a museum exclusively dedicated to the traditions and material culture of the country's Jews and their over two millennia of history there. And though the Moroccan Jewish population has dwindled from 250,000 in 1947 to just around 5,000 today, Moroccan Jews continue to live in dignity. The Moroccan Jewish community is now located mostly in Casablanca, and is known to be both very active in the economic development of the country and highly patriotic.

Eager Partners in Israel—But How Far Will That Go?

The much larger community of nearly one million Israelis of Moroccan origin remain, for their part, clearly attached to their historic homeland. Some occupy high-ranking positions in the Israeli administration: no less than ten ministers in the government of Benjamin Netanyahu installed last May are at least partially of Moroccan origin. For the past twenty years, it is mainly through "cultural exchanges" with this community that relations between Morocco and Israel continued.

Now that open diplomatic and commercial ties have been restored, this numerically and politically significant population can be expected to play a strong supporting role, alongside growing exchanges in the security, business, scientific, medical, environmental, and other fields. As a result, even if these emerging bilateral arrangements fall short of full normalization for now, practical and personal connections can be expected to flourish.

Perhaps that may yield wider regional peace dividends as well, as Morocco once contributed to both Egyptian and Palestinian overtures to Israel. The kingdom stands ready to fulfill that role again. How far Israelis, Palestinians, or others may choose to follow that path remains an open question, even as bilateral Moroccan-Israeli relations enter a new phase of cooperation for their mutual benefit—with a new, and hopefully lasting, element of American blessing.



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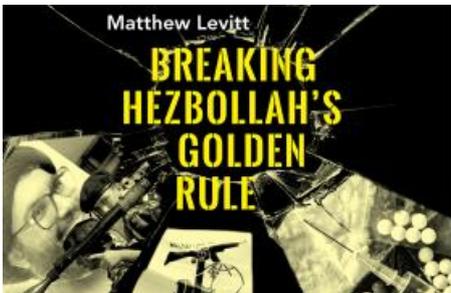
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